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# New England Coats of Arms

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Charles H. Murphy;
Feb. 28, 1902.

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## NEW ENGLAND COATS-OF-ARMS.

By the ancient law, a coat-of-arms descends forever to the heirs-male-of-the-body of the bearer. Notwithstanding this, to increase its revenues, the English college of heraldry refuses to recognize any man's right to bear arms, unless his descent, either from the grantee or a previously accepted bearer, is entered in its records, and the fees paid to place it there. All other arms it declares to be "without authority." The great majority of the gentry of England bear their arms "without authority," resting upon the ancient heraldic law the world over. The college was not instituted till centuries after arms-bearing; and its visitations, which were made at long intervals, extend over a period of about one hundred and fifty years. Its work was so incomplete that many old arms, undiscovered in a first and second visitation, were unearthed in a third. The visitations were not free from the taint of frauds, and while evidence sufficient to satisfy the officers of a use of arms for three generations was acceptable, many old families of eminence stood upon their dignity and absolutely declined to entertain the heralds or submit any evidences to them of their right to bearings they and their ancestors had possessed for centuries. In the time of Elizabeth a king-of-arms was fined and imprisoned for forging pedigrees, but his successors of our day escape any penalties for like offences, though openly charged in numberless cases, and by such authorities as Joseph Foster, author of "Foster's Peerage," and many standard works, by a former Clarenceux king-of-arms, and others less prominent; while the present earl marshal, head of the college, is accused of fraudulently appropriating to himself a grant to the victor of Flodden Field, from whom he is not lineally descended.

We have here in Boston a historical society that through its committee on heraldry assumes authority to pass upon the

validity of arms, found here upon crumbling tombstones, or affixed in seals to ancient documents. The result of its investigations and the sum of its rulings are that twenty-nine families only in New England, and most of these are now extinct in the male line, have any legal right to arms, —all others are spurious! The absurdity of a voluntary society, in this republican country, arrogating to itself the functions and powers of a royal court of arms, must be apparent to anybody. No similar society in any other city in America presumes to attempt such a course. It has brought New England and New England ancestry into contempt in other sections of the country, and the periodicals and historical societies there quote this institution as authority for the statement, that while their own states were settled by gentry, New Englanders are the descendants of peasants.

Bearers of coat-armor were very plenty in England two hundred and fifty years ago and more, and have numerous descendants in male lines to-day in New England. A thousand families here are undoubtedly properly arms-bearers. Their claims are as good as any in that list of twenty-nine. And what claim to preëminence has that roll of "less than thirty?" They are in precisely the position of the thousand others here. No descendant of any one of them has ever "established his right" in the college of arms, and his bearings are, therefore, "without authority." No sanction of any society in Boston, nor any committtee on heraldry appointed by such society, can lend any weight to such arms. The opinions of that committee, if given without prejudice, are of the same value as those of any other like number of men who have investigated the subject. The society, in its early days, did good work in recording such arms of our old families (since declared by it to be spurious) as were found in remains here in New England; but when at a later date the conceit seized it that it was clothed with authority to pass upon the validity of arms, an arbitrary rule was adopted in 1864 which excluded some, but retained a large number, which now by the amended rules of still later adoption are thrown out. So that the sanction of this society varies from time to time— a rather peculiar condition for an institu-

tion that assumes to sit in judgment upon these matters. The mischief done to our section by the course of this society is incalculable. The leading historical magazine of Virginia makes this boast: "It is well known that the ruling class in Virginia were Church of England men, while the ruling class in New England were dissenters from the dominant faith in England. Converts to a new faith come chiefly from the lower strata of society," and then cites this very society here in Boston in confirmation. Yet we New Englanders know a whole nation was "sifted" to send "choice grain" to these shores. Following this is a long roll of arms-bearing families of Virginia, and the evidences on which their claims rest. By the same tests, applied in New England, we should have an equal proportion of "gentlemen of coat-armor"—and they are the only rational tests.

An ancient tombstone and the heraldic device thereon, are antiques and should interest us. It should be the mission of our local historical society to preserve, classify and illustrate all such remains. No one is competent to decide finally as to the authenticity of such arms, nor is there any occasion to call it in question. We insult the dead and their descendants the moment we attempt such a course. Our duty is to accept them as genuine, in the absence of positive evidence of their being of recent manufacture or otherwise fraudulent. We have no need to ask the officers of the heralds' college if any shield is of record there. Many arms exist in England, of date before the college was founded, that have no recognition therein. These are not spurious arms. In some cases, old arms, repeated generation after generation upon tombstones, are in some branch of the family finally sanctioned by the college for that branch, or a new grant is made to that branch, changed so slightly as to be undistinguishable upon a seal (if the field of the old is ermine, the new may be erminois, for example.) This act does not make the previous display in other branches in England fraudulent, nor have we any reason to declare the use fraudulent in New England. The arms were the possession of the family generations before the recognition of the college. Neither have we the right to decide that the coat-of-arms upon a Massachusetts tombstone, more than two hundred years old, over the grave of one who held responsible and important office

in his day, must be spurious because of "irregularity in arrangement of quarterings." Such errors through ignorance of stonecutters or others, are found in the old country and may be looked for here; and what can be said of a society that has engraved and published in its magazine, a cut of the tombstone of a New England clergyman in order to print an article with the sole object of arguing that the arms upon it were spurious? What right has it thus to wound the feelings of descendants who believe in the honesty of their ancestor, a man of unspotted character during a life of eighty years, and who has been nearly two centuries in his grave? What occasion can call for such a course?

As the mass of the gentry of England prefer "without authority" to carry the arms of their ancestors, knowing their gentility to be many generations old, rather than accept from the college what would be virtually a new grant and a declaration that they had but just attained to that station, or by bribery to have concocted a fraudulent lineage by the college; it seems time for our local institution to give up playing "heraldry-college" and devote its energies, in the matter of arms, to the recording of those found here, without troubling itself as to the information the English heralds may or may not have upon record, touching the family.